

Ministers Back Plan for a NATO Buildup, But Recession May Curb Arms Spending

WSJ, Friday, 3 Dec 9

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BRUSSELS, Belgium—Defense ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization approved plans to improve NATO's military strength, particularly in conventional weapons. But officials conceded that the necessary funds may not be available because of the recession.

A communique issued at the end of the annual defense ministers' meeting said that NATO members "should actively seek ways" to exploit emerging technologies to improve conventional capabilities "and thereby enhance deterrence and defense."

The aim of this improvement in conventional weapons is to prevent an escalation to nuclear warfare. With the Soviet Union judged to enjoy numerical superiority in conventional and nuclear weapons, NATO could be forced to resort quickly to nuclear weapons in a conflict if it didn't build up its conventional forces.

The drive to strengthen conventional weapons rests on the belief that the West has a commanding lead over the Soviet Union in electronic warfare and could develop precision guided missiles that would enable it to destroy targets with conventional warheads instead of nuclear weapons.

No Policy Change

NATO and defense officials emphasized that the accent on improving conventional arms doesn't signal any change in its reliance on a combination of nuclear and conventional weapons for its defense strategy.

Fueling speculation that a change in strategy was being considered were reports that Pentagon officials were mulling new strategic policies, and recent statements by NATO's supreme commander, U.S. Gen. Bernard Rogers.

Gen. Rogers said that more and better conventional arms in Europe could lessen the need for deploying added nuclear weapons.

A senior U.S. defense official, who asked to remain unidentified, said, "Nothing Rogers said would justify speculation on a change in strategy. It's always been our policy to deter at all levels, to contain a war at the lowest level of violence."

Gen. Rogers' statements, the official said, don't "represent a change so much as an improvement in the current strategy."

Tight Defense Outlays

This improvement, however, is a costly one. Gen. Rogers said NATO members would have to increase their defense spending by a real, or inflation-adjusted, 4% annually. The current target of 3% is being met in Europe only by Britain and Norway, and defense budgets are stagnating, or even decreasing, in real terms in France and West Germany.

British Defense Minister John Nott said "There aren't any signs European NATO countries can put more money into conventional weapons," as required by the NATO force plan for 1983 to 1987 that was adopted yesterday. NATO Secretary-General Joseph Luns said in his concluding remarks that several NATO countries have been unable to meet NATO spending commitments. "Too often the force plans have been adopted and then in reality some countries bid less than they had pledged," he said.

Nevertheless, U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger told a news conference

that this year's meeting showed a "greater understanding and appreciation for the need for a united NATO."

But political difficulties involving Spain, Greece and Turkey surfaced during the gathering.

Spain Plans Referendum

Spain's new prime minister, Felipe Gonzalez, announced on Wednesday that he was ready to freeze the process of Spanish integration into NATO pending a referendum on the issue. As a result, Mr. Luns said, the Spanish representative couldn't "give any opinion on anything."

Greece refused to endorse three parts of the final declaration calling for stronger nuclear forces. In addition, a lingering dispute between Greece and Turkey flared again when Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu accused Turkey of making warlike preparations in the Aegean Sea.

Turkish Defense Minister Umit Haluk Bayulken responded that "a Turkish threat to Greece is an absurd and preposterous contention," and he accused Greece of trying to "blackmail" NATO over the Aegean issue.

The final communique also said that the ministers made an "important contribution to the credibility of NATO deterrence" by approving a plan to reinforce allied forces in Europe in a crisis.

It said: "The continued and undiminished presence of U.S. and Canadian forces in Europe is essential to NATO's defense and deterrence strategy, and serves the interests of all the members of the alliance."

This statement is viewed as a response to members of Congress who want the U.S. to pull its troops out of Europe because they feel the allies aren't doing enough for their own defense. Mr. Luns said such a withdrawal would be "very, very bad."